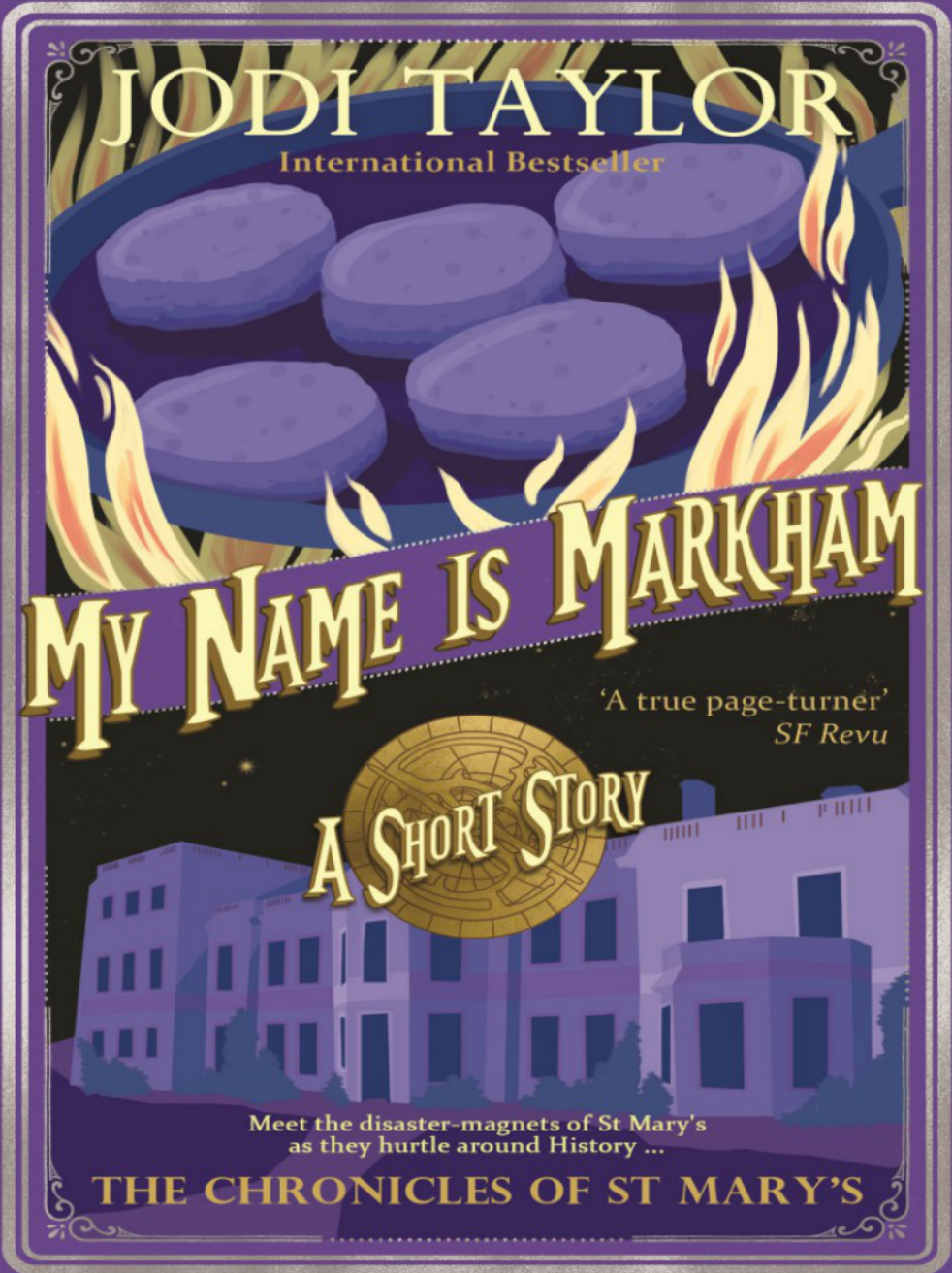




JODI TAYLOR

International Bestseller

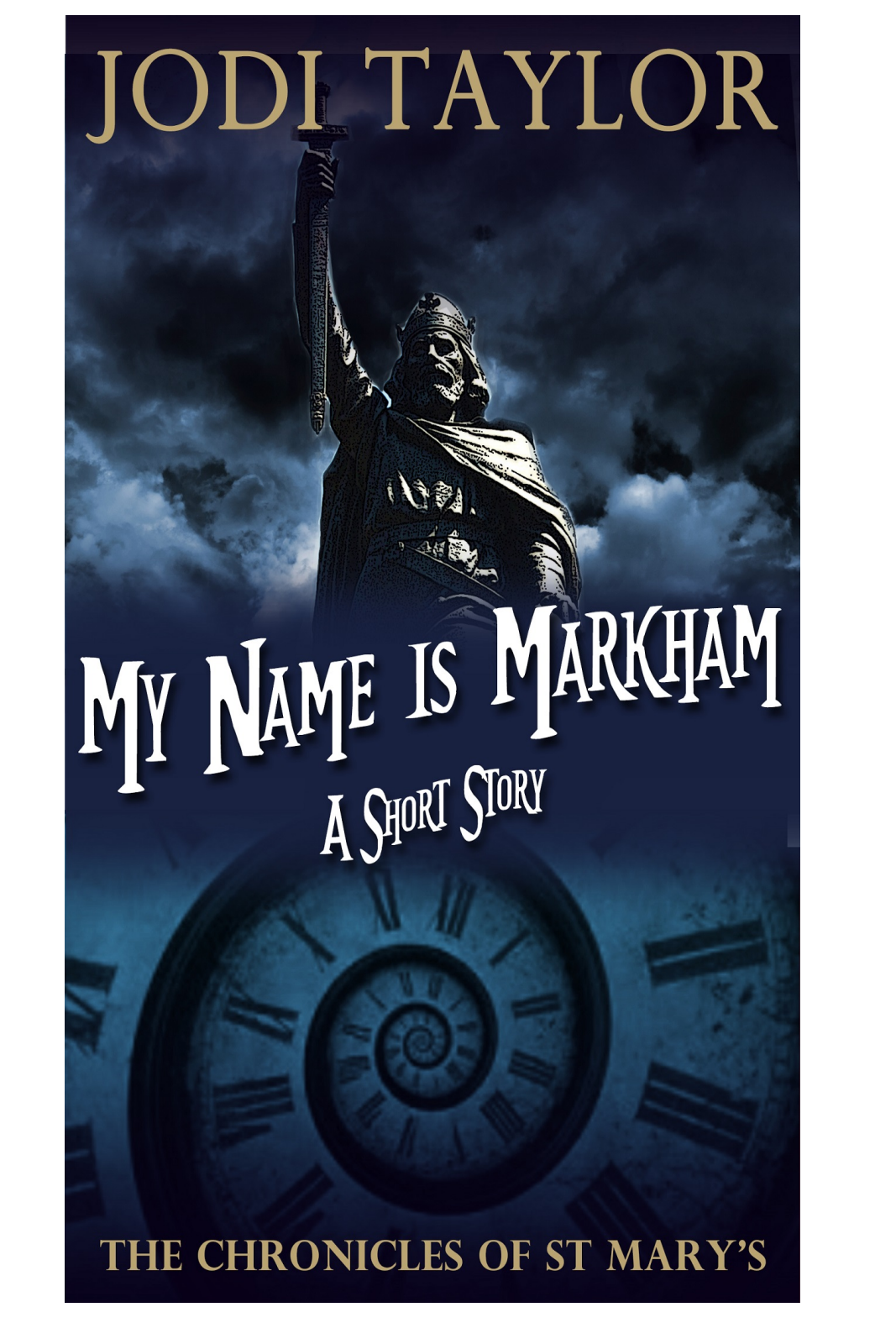
MY NAME IS MARKHAM

'A true page-turner'
SF Revu

A SHORT STORY

Meet the disaster-magnets of St Mary's
as they hurtle around History ...

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S



JODI TAYLOR

MY NAME IS MARKHAM
A SHORT STORY

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

MY NAME IS MARKHAM

A Christmas short story from
the Chronicles of St Mary's series

Jodi Taylor

Like a smaller and much scruffier Greta Garbo – finally – Markham speaks!

It's Christmas and time for the first (and almost certainly last) St Mary's Annual Children's Christmas Party – attendance compulsory, by order of Dr Bairstow. Discovered practising his illegal reindeer dance and poo-dropping routine, our hero, along with fellow disaster-magnets Peterson and Maxwell, is despatched to Anglo-Saxon England to discover the truth about Alfred and the cakes.

In his own words, our hero reveals Major Guthrie's six-point guide to a successful assignment and the Security Section's true opinion of the History Department. And of historians in general. And of one historian in particular.

And, just to be clear, it is time travel, for God's sake. Forget all that pretentious 'investigating major historical events in contemporary time' rubbish.

This is history without the capital 'H'. Because this is the way the Security Section rolls!

All proceeds from this short story will be donated to the
Help for Heroes charity.

You have helped to make a difference by buying this book.

Dramatis Thingummy

The Markham	our story. Acting Head of the Security Section and the back end of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Inventor of the yet to be patented Reindeer Poo Distribution System. Not uninvolved with the legend of Alfred burning the cakes. It's only a short story, but he manages to pack a lot in.
Maxwell	Minister beloved. Assuming the role of Tinkerbell at the upcoming children's party.
Maxwell	Head of the History Department and slightly dishevelled fairy. Plays a minor role in this particular epic.
Peter	Where you get Maxwell, Peterson is sure to follow.
Dis	Foster of the reindeer poo-filled lift and not happy about it.
The Evans	end of Rudolph. Absent-minded consumer of potentially very unpleasant egg sandwiches.
Mr Dieter	ary Santa Claus. Ho ho ho!
Chief Farrell	a temporary resting place for Rudolph's back end.
Mrsy Lingos	with her red and gold Mohican and flashing fairy lights.
Dr Bledsoe	from Thirsk University for the occasion.
Dr Bledsoe	of St Mary's.
	Twelve small children and their justifiably apprehensive parents.
Alfred	the great fight against the Danes. Founder of the Navy. Fire minder. Failed cake watcher.
Owner of the	the cakes. Broom wielder. Not happy.

My name is Markham and I am a recovering security guard.

Maxwell told me to write this report. Actually, what happened was that I visited her in her office after our last assignment and she took exception to me criticising a phrase or two of her report, and the next thing I knew her scratchpad flew across the room and hit me squarely on the back of the head and she said if I thought I could do it any better then I should write the bloody thing myself.

So I have.

It was, believe it or not, the day of The First St Mary's Annual Children's Christmas Party. We were doing it for charity. Well, actually we were doing it because Dr Bairstow had told us to. I don't know who'd told him to do it. We were all contributing something.

Professor Rapson, Head of R&D, had put together a recipe for artificial snow, which had set fire to his workbench, and the smell of burning rubber was enough to blow your socks off. Dr Bairstow had forbidden any further research in this area.

In the kitchens, Mrs Mack was up to her armpits in jelly and sausages and cupcakes. Not all in the same mixing bowl, obviously.

Mrs Enderby from Wardrobe was making costumes for us all. I was supposed to be one of Santa's Little Helpers, but Evans and I were going to be a reindeer. We'd manufactured a costume out of old blankets. We had a battery-driven nose and I had a couple of handfuls of black olives to drop behind us for authentic reindeer poo. Kids love that sort of thing. We were expecting to be the hit of the afternoon.

Dieter, the biggest man in the place, was to be Father Christmas. He could be heard ho ho ho-ing around the building and getting on everyone's nerves.

Hunter was dressing as Tinkerbell. I'm not sure what Tinkerbell has to do with Christmas, but you don't argue with her. Not unless you want a really, really clean colon.

And if you think that's terrifying, try Miss North as a particularly frosty Ice Queen. She'd offended Mrs Enderby by hiring a magnificent costume especially for the day.

Bashford, Sykes and Atherton, on behalf of the History Department, were the world's most mismatched elves.

Max was Anna, and Kalinda Black was Elsa. Kalinda Black is tall and blonde and just the sort of person who wouldn't be too careful where she hurls her icicles. I don't know what she does to anyone else, but she frightens the living daylight out of me. I couldn't believe they were going to let her near small children. She's usually at Thirsk, either fighting our corner for funding or apologising for us,

depending on what sort of a week we've had, but she'd come back for The Party. St Mary's was gathering its chicks for Christmas.

Dr Foster was going as herself. No one argued with that.

The centrepiece of our efforts, however, was the ever-resourceful Miss Lingoss. Thanks to the best efforts of the Technical Section, her towering red and gold mohican was festooned with flashing fairy lights. She looked sensational.

There would be games, prizes, a dinosaur holo, and tons of party food.

Mr Strong, our caretaker, was making a sleigh for Santa to arrive on.

The whole building was strung with fairy lights, tinsel, and streamers, and we had a giant Christmas tree in the Hall.

We were going to be a sensation and maybe this time, for all the right reasons.

Oh no, we weren't. As you were with the reindeer. Evans and me, practising in what we thought was a deserted part of the building, were caught rehearsing our reindeer dance and working on our poo-dropping technique – by Dr Bairstow of all people. I mean, how did he even get up all those stairs? You watch him limping his way slowly around the building with all the speed of a striking snail, and one nanosecond later, he's two floors up and giving you a nasty look from the doorway.

We explained, but it was useless. I even showed him the really clever pouch we'd rigged – black olives for the scattering of – and believe it or not, he looked even more unimpressed. For some reason he laid all the blame at my door and I was ordered to report to Maxwell for the last assignment before Christmas.

I mean, what's that all about? I'd reckoned on a nice, gentle run-up to the festive season, including something imaginative with Nurse Hunter and a couple of beers, and the next minute I'm being despatched to the History Department so they can do something horrible to me.

I drew myself up to utter a well-worded protest, but he silently produced a massive wad of Deductions From Wages To Pay For Damages Incurred forms and, right in front of my eyes, slowly tore them in half.

I indicated my willingness to comply with his commands, and raced off before he could change his mind.

I've forgotten to say that, this week, Major Guthrie was away at Thirsk, which left me in charge of the Security Section. His parting instructions had been clear.

‘Never mind trying to keep them safe, Mr Markham, it’s never going to happen. I generally think that if seventy-five per cent of them are still on their feet when we get them back to St Mary’s, then it’s been a job well done. And if seventy-five per cent of those not on their feet are still conscious, then it’s been a resounding success. Personally, I prefer it when they’re all limp, white and unconscious in Sick Bay – especially the redhead – but that’s too much to ask for.’

‘Got it, sir,’ I said, my mind on Tinkerbell and her tutu.

‘Pay attention, Mr Markham. Should any assignments occur during my absence, your priorities are as follows:

‘One – bring them back.

‘Two – bring them all back.

‘Three – bring them all back alive.

‘Four – bring them all back conscious.

‘Five – bring them all back undamaged.

‘Six – keep an eye on the redhead.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good luck, Mr Markham.’

And off he’d gone, leaving me in charge.

And here I was in Maxwell’s office, waiting to learn my fate.

When I was a boy, the man up the road had a cat that used to have these funny fits and go for you. It was perfectly normal most of the time, and then suddenly its eyes would go funny, and it would go mad, attacking everything in sight. Other cats, dogs, lorries etc, whatever it could get its claws into, and the only warning we ever got was that its eyes would go funny. Historians have exactly the same expression. Bright-eyed madness. Which, as with the cat, always means trouble.

Our main function is protecting historians from themselves, each other, hostile contemporaries, meteorological and geological disturbances, social unrest, and just about everything the universe can throw at us, so as you can imagine, historians and trouble go hand in hand. Our other job is to guard the building, but that just entails watching the monitors and eating our own body weight in ham sandwiches while listening to the footie.

So when I walked into Max’s office, and she and Peterson grinned at me with their mad cat eyes, I knew things were going to get exciting.

‘What ho,’ said Peterson, cheerfully, his feet up on Max’s desk.

‘Good afternoon,’ I said, because I was now in charge of the Security Section and standards have to be maintained.

‘A last-minute assignment,’ said Maxwell. ‘Are you up for it?’

I don’t know about anyone else, but I’ve found that as the years have passed, I’ve become older and wiser, and certainly not stupid

enough to jump blindly at something offered by the History Department.

‘Of course,’ I said, which wasn’t actually what I’d intended to say at all.

Peterson grinned. ‘Don’t you want to know where and when?’

‘Does it matter? It’ll all pass by in a blur. There’ll be a lot of running and panic. Nothing will go as planned, and I’ll pick up some ghastly disease that will ruin my Christmas. The question I do want to ask is “why now?”’

‘Why now what?’ they said, muddying the issue. I don’t think they can help themselves.

‘We’re gearing up for the kids’ Christmas Party this afternoon. What’s so urgent it can’t wait until after the New Year?’

They exchanged glances.

‘There’s been bit of a row.’

‘Really?’ I said, interested. ‘Have I missed something?’

‘Not here. At Thirsk.’

‘They’re always having rows. They’re academics. Who’s hurt this time?’

‘No one. Yet.’

‘So what’s the problem?’

‘There’s been a certain amount of controversy over the cakes.’

‘What – you mean like who had the last slice when no one was looking?’

‘Not quite,’ said Peterson carefully. ‘More like whether they were actually burned at all.’

‘Surely,’ I said, because they’re historians and sometimes I just can’t help winding them up, ‘this is something their catering department should be investigating. I fail to see why we should knock ourselves out because they’ve had a bit of a culinary crisis.’

‘Not them, cloth head,’ said Peterson, rising nicely to the bait. ‘Alfred.’

‘Oh, him. Cool.’

They stared at me. They’re lovely people, historians – a bit dim, of course, and with the life expectancy of a frog in a blender – but they do tend to think they’re the only people who know anything about history. And that’s history without the stupid capital H. Just ordinary history.

I sighed. Time to dazzle them.

‘Alfred the Great. Can’t remember the exact dates but late 9th century. Succeeded his brother Aethelred to become king. Led his country in the struggle against the Danes. Attacked at Chippenham and fled with a handful of men to the Somerset Levels. Conducted guerrilla warfare from there. Burned the cakes. Went on to defeat the

Danes and negotiate peace. Enlarged the navy. Instituted legal reforms. Promoted schools and education. The only king other than Cnut to be called "Great". Was he the one you meant?"

They nodded, temporarily speechless. You don't see that happen often.

'So do I gather academic blood has been shed over the question of the cakes?'

They nodded again.

'And in the interests of festive goodwill we're off to check it out.'

They nodded again.

'And, of course, this unseemly haste has absolutely nothing to do with avoiding the preparations for the kids' party and, with luck, the party itself.'

They shook their heads. Absolutely not. How could I even think such a thing?

I heaved myself to my feet. 'Just think, Max, next year your kid will be lining up for Santa, as well.'

There was a funny sort of silence. I don't know why.

'What's the matter?' I said.

She shook herself. 'I don't know. Something just walked across my grave.'

'Oh, I get that a lot. Sometimes I think I must be buried in a pedestrian precinct somewhere. So – where and when?'

'Get yourself kitted out and we'll meet you in Hawking in one hour.'

'Rodger dodger,' I said and went off to tell Hunter she'd have to start without me.

I see I've got this far and not explained anything.

We work for the Institute of Historical Research at St Mary's Priory, just outside Rushford. We do time travel. We're not supposed to say that and historians get right up their own arses about it, but that's what we do. We're supposed to call it investigating something or other in contemporary something else, but it's time travel. We go back to some obscure event hundreds or thousands of years ago, our historians get excited about something or other, something horrible happens, we all have to run for our lives, and the Security Section saves the day. We're fairly light-hearted about the whole thing, but that's because: historians haven't got a clue what's happening most of the time; the Technical Section doesn't care as long as we don't break anything; and the Security Section is incredibly brave and resourceful. But mostly we're fairly light-hearted because we have to be. People die here, and if we ever stopped and thought carefully about what we do, then we might not do it at all.

If I was asked though, I would have to say this assignment – Alfred and his cakes – looked reasonably straightforward. Don't confuse that with easy. Nothing is easy when St Mary's is involved. But straightforward was good. In, observe, and out again. Everything should be fine.

I had a tricky ten minutes with Hunter and, since she was wearing her Tinkerbelle costume at the time, I might, if I hadn't possessed enormous strength of character and determination, have allowed myself to become distracted. Unfortunately, I don't possess enormous strength etc, and my distraction nearly got my face slapped, but that's usually quite a good sign with Hunter, so I was optimistic that, on my return, we'd be doing something interesting with her wand.

Mrs Enderby in Wardrobe had my gear ready and waiting for me. A coarse, brown tunic, some trousers – thank God, because I've lost count of the number of centuries that have been gifted with a view of my nether regions – scruffy leather shoes, and some sort of headgear that seemed to have been made from a sack and came down over my shoulders.

Typically, Max and Peterson had commandeered much more upmarket costumes. Max wore a dark dress of some kind. No idea what the material was, but you didn't see her twisting and scratching in extreme discomfort. Peterson wore a short tunic and trousers and both of them had far more adequate footwear than that assigned to me. I made a mental note to request union representation again. Anonymously, of course. I'm not bloody stupid, you know.

And another thing; I don't know what 9th century women wore under their dresses – actually I don't know what most women wear under their dresses in any century, Hunter has some strong views on that sort of thing – but I was prepared to bet that for all her protestations and insistence on historical accuracy, Maxwell was wearing anomalous underwear.

I stowed away a stun gun and pepper spray – purely for defensive purposes because we're really not allowed to injure contemporaries – and stared at myself in the mirror.

'Very nice,' said Mrs Enderby, brightly. 'An authentic Anglo-Saxon peasant.'

I was looking at Peterson and Maxwell's outfits and they certainly weren't Anglo-Saxon peasants. Just for once, why couldn't I be the lord, or the baron, or the rich merchant, and one or both of them be a member of the oppressed majority?

I might have mentioned this to them as we lined up outside pod Number Eight and it took them ages to stop laughing.

Peterson and I climbed inside to stow our gear, tactfully leaving Max and Chief Farrell a private moment together. I don't know why

we bothered. They shook hands briskly and a moment later, she was inside with us. You'd never guess they were married. And with a kid. We don't talk about him a lot.

'Everything all laid in,' said Dieter. 'A quick in and out and back in time for the party. Ho ho ho.'

I was checking the lockers, making sure I had everything I needed to repel whatever the 9th century was going to throw at us. I knew dinosaurs and mammoths were extinct and the Black Death hadn't arrived yet, but that wouldn't stop either of them from discovering something new and innovative to die from.

'All set?' said Maxwell, not waiting for a response. 'Off we go then. Computer, initiate jump.'

'Jump initiated.'

And the world went white.

We stood in the doorway and looked around. If I was an historian – and I think everyone at St Mary's is grateful I'm not – I'd be describing the scene in detail, listing the types of trees and generally being intellectual. All I can say is that everything was wet. Really, really wet. It wasn't actually raining at that moment, but the lull had only a very temporary feel to it. The ground was soft and wet. The smell of wet earth, stagnant water and rotting leaves curled around us.

We had arrived around the beginning of April, 878 AD, and spring was springing everywhere. Fat green buds were on the point of bursting into leaf, although they were no greener than the tree trunks themselves. Moss grew on everything in this mild, wet climate. I could see new grass peeping through the thickly rutted mud. But mostly, everything was wet. We were in a world of wet.

'Bloody hell,' said Peterson, pulling his foot free of the gloopy mud with a sucking sound.

I was convinced we'd come to the wrong place. There was no way Alfred would ever get a flame going here long enough to set fire to anything, let alone the cakes. We were only two steps from the pod and already Maxwell's hem was soaked – something about which she would be complaining bitterly later on. I've seen her endure blood, pain and broken bones, but she really doesn't do cold and wet. I think her natural habitat is a hot bath with a mug of tea.

We'd landed on the Isle of Athelney itself. Tactically, it was a good place for a king on the run – surrounded by marshland and swamps. There was a wooden causeway from Lyng to the island itself, but it was heavily guarded at both ends. Professor Rapson had wanted us to take a flat-bottomed punt to help us get around, but we couldn't get it in the pod. And we had tried; well, the professor,

Peterson and I tried. Maxwell said it wouldn't fit and just sat down with her arms folded, and that expression women have when they're right, they know they're right, and the whole world is only seconds away from knowing they're right. All women have it. Even Hunter. I reckon it's a gene thing and they can't help themselves.

We set off. My clothes were itchy and smelled funny. Bloody historians always hog the best things for themselves. I'm always the bloody slave. Or the servant. Or the groom. Or whatever. It's only a matter of time before they make me the eunuch. Figuratively speaking. Maxwell's not so bad. She's a woman – or so she maintains – and she usually stays quietly at the back, keeping her head down and her mouth shut. Except for that time in Viriconium when she poked me so hard with her staff that she nearly impaled my bloody kidney. When I remonstrated in the mildest way possible, she told me that many people live a happy and useful life with only one kidney and to stop moaning for God's sake. Actually, Major Guthrie always says he feels a lot happier if she's in front of him, where he can keep an eye on her, and I think he might have a point, so this time, I stayed at the back, ready to spring into action the moment they got themselves into trouble.

I've only ever been to Somerset once and that was some time ago when I took a girlfriend to the Glastonbury Festival and she went all funny and started rolling her eyes around and falling over. We were all convinced she was channelling King Arthur or Merlin or something, but it turned out she just couldn't handle the local scrumpy.

What I'm trying to say is that, with the exception of the Glastonbury Festival which invariably attracts a year's worth of rain on its first day, Somerset is reasonably dry these days. Not so in the 9th century. I forget who was the first of us to fall into a bog, but it didn't matter because ten minutes into the jump we were all soaked and swampy.

There were paths. There must have been, otherwise the entire population would be permanently up to their knees in mud. In the end, I shouldered the two of them aside, cut myself a long pole and used it to probe the ground ahead of us. There was a short 'Why didn't I think of that?' silence and then they fell in behind me.

I have to say that while no one was ever going to get sunburned here, it was a brilliant place for a king to hide out. You'd never get an army in. And I bet anything metal had a life expectancy of about half an hour before it crumbled into rust. And that would be on a dry day. Which apparently, this was.

We meandered around pools of water, soggy trees and fallen

branches. It was as if the entire landscape conspired to make progress as difficult as possible. I watched my feet sink into the soft soil and each footprint fill up with water. Something twitched in the back of my mind and I stopped.

‘What?’ said Peterson.

‘How heavy is a pod?’

‘No idea. I’ve never tried to lift one. I’m standing in a puddle. Is this important?’

‘Suppose the pod sinks.’

‘What do you mean, sinks? It’s not the bloody Titanic. Number of icebergs seen today – nil.’ He stopped and there was a bit of a silence while they had a bit of a think.

‘The weight is evenly distributed,’ said Maxwell, doubtfully. ‘It might sink a little, but surely not completely.’

‘How tall is a pod?’

‘No idea, but Dieter can stand upright inside them and he’s the biggest man I know. So over six and a half feet.’

‘Seven feet three,’ said Peterson.

We stared at him.

‘A pod is seven feet three inches tall,’ he said, with his why don’t you know that expression, and I made plans to make him an honorary security guard so we could co-opt him on to our team for the Saturday night trivia quiz in the pub.

‘It’s not going to sink seven feet in a couple of hours,’ said Maxwell, giving me another poke. ‘It’ll be fine.’

Another shining example of the triumph of historian optimism over security guard experience.

We smelled the village long before we saw it. Wood smoke, animals – especially pigs – and cooking.

We crawled forwards amongst the trees to check it out, Maxwell tucking her skirt into her belt to keep it out of the mud. We stared at her legs.

‘What?’

‘Gryffindor rugby socks?’ I said, my mind pondering life’s injustices. For the purposes of historical accuracy, I’d been rammed into some musty old sack, probably complete with authentic 9th-century fleas bred by Professor Rapson especially for today, and bloody historians are wearing bloody rugby socks.

She wasn’t listening. Of course she bloody wasn’t. Neither of them were. They – all historians – have this kind of laser-like focus that drives everything else out of their heads. Not that there’s room for much in there anyway. If only they could muster the same laser-like focus on staying alive. On the other hand, if they did, I’d be out of a job, so it’s probably just as well they don’t.

They'd pulled out their recorders and were muttering away. This could go on for hours. I settled myself against a tree trunk so nothing could get behind me and kept an eye out.

[The village was a large clearing with some twenty huts of varying sizes. Most of them were round, and thatched with what looked like reeds. I wondered how waterproof they were. Moss grew on the roofs as well. Many huts had one or more lean-tos built against them, sheltering firewood and livestock. I don't know how waterproof the thatch was, but it did seem to me they were more likely to suffer from groundwater than rainwater. They'd made an effort to build above ground level, with each hut constructed on twelve-inch-high stone foundations that provided some sort of elementary damp-proof course. The stones themselves were thick with green slime and moss.

There were no streets, or even paths, but causeways made of brushwood ran across the clearing, from one hut to another, or to the big central stone pit where a large fire crackled, sending up a plume of blue-grey smoke to be lost in the blue-grey sky.

In contrast to the bustle all around him, a solitary figure sat cross-legged near the woodpile. Occasionally he would scramble stiffly to his feet and with great care and precision, place new logs on the fire.

I know the village idiot is a bit of a cliché, but the thing about clichés is that they tend to be true. Every village has at least one – if not many. I suppose when you don't ever have the opportunity to travel far from your birthplace, it's very hard not to marry your cousin. When the same families interbreed over the years, there are always casualties. They're usually cared for by the community in a way that is supposed to happen today and never does, and appropriate jobs are found for them. Firewood gathering. Keeping an eye on the less mobile livestock. And tending the fire, of course, as this one was doing.

He sat on an old log, huddled into his cloak. His head was down and I could see only a thatch of straw-like hair. Under his cloak he wore a faded red tunic that covered his knees. Everything below his knees was caked in dried mud.

And then, as he leaned over to add another log to the fire, the neck of his tunic gaped and I caught a hint of gold around his neck. At once, he pulled up the neck and wrapped his cloak even more closely around himself, but I'd seen it. And so had Maxwell and Peterson.

'Bloody hell,' said Max, in quiet excitement. 'That's him. That's Alfred. Must be.'

No one is ever quite as you expect them to be. I remember those two legendary lovers, Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, and quite honestly, you'd have to go a long way to meet two uglier people than

they were. They both of them had massive noses – maybe that’s what drew them together in the first place – and Cleopatra had nostrils like the air intakes on a jet turbine. And eyebrows like two giant hairy caterpillars as well. It was a bit of a shock, I can tell you. Max always says that Henry V was the ugliest bloke she’s ever seen – and that includes the men at St Mary’s, which I though was a little unkind of her. Despite being unable to clear five foot six inches unless I’m standing on tip-toe, and not being all there in the ear department, I’m not bad looking. And Hunter’s always banging on about Chief Farrell’s eyes – usually at some quite inappropriate moments, let me tell you – and apparently she’s not the only one who thinks that. And Peterson – generally reckoned to be the best-looking bloke in the building – would be fighting off women with a stick, if they weren’t all so terrified of Dr Foster, of course.

I’ve forgotten where I was. Yes. Alfred. Alfred the Great as he would astoundingly be known. All right, I know I’d just mistaken him for the village idiot, but it’s a mistake anyone could have made.

He was staring thoughtfully into the fire. Tradition says he was so busy formulating plans to defeat the Danes that he never noticed the cakes burning right in front of him. This Alfred, however, obviously took his job very seriously indeed, staring unblinking at the lumps of bread dough set out round the fire, and bringing to them the same sort of single-minded concentration he would bring to every task in his life.

He wasn’t much taller than me and that’s saying something – but where I’m a living example of good things coming in little packages, he, not to overemphasise the point, wasn’t. He was skinny – his arms and legs were stick thin. His face was a yellowy-white with swollen, protruding, bloodshot eyes. His skin was bad – not teenage acne, but a really nasty rash which ran down one cheek, under his chin and down his neck. It looked too inflamed to shave, but I was willing to bet he didn’t need to anyway. I think he was around thirty years old, but he still looked a boy. His movements were slow and creaky. I wondered if he had arthritis. If so, he wouldn’t want to hang around here – arthritis capital of the world.

‘Crohn’s disease,’ muttered Peterson.

I looked at him.

‘There’s a theory he suffered from Crohn’s disease. On top of everything else. He doesn’t have an easy life.’

Maxwell shrugged. ‘Some people thrive on adversity. Us, for example. Maybe he’s another.’

She had a point. We’d covered this in the briefing. Alfred was a fighter. Legend says that at a frighteningly early age he won a book of Saxon poems from his mother by memorising the entire contents.

He had been, as we could see, a sickly child, but he stood alongside his brother, King Aethelred, in the year of the nine battles. When the king died, Alfred was named his successor, even though the king had two young sons. No one objected, so he must have proved his worth. His position was weak, though, and he had no option but to sue for peace. He bought off the Danes, who retired to London, presumably to count their money.

Five years later the Danes had a new leader – Guthrum. Again, Alfred negotiated a peace, but Guthrum broke the treaty. He attacked Chippenham where Alfred was staying for Christmas, killing nearly everyone. Alfred and a small band of followers barely escaped to Athelney. And here he was – at the lowest point of his life. Defeated, alone, exiled, ill, and with no immediate hope of a comeback, scrounging food and shelter in exchange for such service as he could offer.

Even as we watched, he stood up, stretched stiffly, collected a few more logs from the pile, and carefully laid them across the fire.

‘Don’t underestimate what he’s doing,’ said Peterson. ‘This is the communal fire. They’ll use it for cooking, drying wood and clothes, and smoking fish and game. This is the fire from which all other fires are lit. It’s never allowed to go out. Look at the ash bed on it.’

He was right. I couldn’t spare a lot of attention – I was watching their backs because they certainly weren’t – but I could see pans of water set to heat up on homemade trivets, together with pots, skillets and cauldrons, all carefully arranged around the fire. On an arrangement of flat hearth stones at his feet sat about two dozen lumps of what I’d taken to be dough of some kind, either proving or cooking in the heat.

‘They’ll sit round this in the evening,’ said Maxwell. ‘I’m betting those huts are cold and damp. They’ll stay by the fire as long as possible, only going inside to sleep or get out of the rain. They’ll use this one to light their small private fires at night in their own huts.’

I looked at their huts. Their cold, damp, chimney-less huts. No wonder everyone preferred to gather around the fire. Life was lived outside. You only went inside when the weather was bad. I imagined life inside one of those small round huts. I saw them sitting inside, either in the dark or by the light of a wick burning in some evil-smelling animal fat. Their tiny fire would produce a disproportionate amount of smoke, all curling around looking for a way out. I heard the rain dripping through the roof. Saw the water oozing up through the floor. Wet clothes. Wet bedding. What a life.

And yet they seemed cheerful enough.

‘Well, they don’t know any better, do they?’ said Maxwell. ‘They probably think they’ve got all mod cons here and life is good.’

A bit of a disbelieving silence there.

A number of people were trudging along a broad causeway: the men, home from gathering food. Several of them had a fish or two on a line. One had what looked like a brace of rabbits. Others had various waterfowl, swinging by their feet. But all of them carried a cord of firewood each, and the first thing they did was distribute it. Two thirds of what they carried went on the big communal pile by the fire. Only one third was stacked neatly in their own hut's lean-to for their private use. And yes, all right, that was quite interesting, but Peterson and Maxwell were nearly having orgasms, muttering about communal needs and teamwork and God knows what. I listened with only half an ear – quite appropriate in my case – because a herd of mammoths could have cantered past at that moment and they'd have missed them. They seemed entirely oblivious to the fact that there were people all around the place, and that half a dozen of them could trip over us at any moment, and good luck with explaining we weren't Danes.

I ran an eye around as much as I could see of the landscape, but everything seemed quiet enough. Birds still sang in the trees, which usually means nothing unpleasant is creeping about. Apart from us, of course.

I became aware the two of them were on the move, crawling about picking up sticks and odd bits of wood. I put a stop to this madness by simply grabbing their tunics and hauling them back again.

'Where do you think you're going?'

Maxwell sighed as if she couldn't believe such stupidity. 'Down there, of course.'

'Are you out of your minds?' I said, and I think we all know the answer to that one. 'The whole country's on Dane alert. They'll skewer you as soon as you appear.'

'No they won't,' said Peterson, who's also no better than he should be. 'That's why we're gathering firewood. As a gift. Firewood is a currency. They'll love us. You just wait and see.'

There was no arguing with them. The Major always says the main purpose of the History Department is to get themselves into trouble, and the main purpose of the Security Section is to get them back out again. I sighed heavily and followed them, prepared to fulfil my main purpose, and pausing on the way to pick up a bit of wood.

Peterson stared at it. 'Is that the best you can do?'

I considered explaining the importance of remaining hands-free in case of trouble, but they wouldn't have understood me. As I said, historians are lovely people but single-minded. Very, very single-minded.

OK. Time to set the record straight. Yes, history is quite interesting. Even without the capital H. And yes, you can tell the History Department I said that. Sadly, the most interesting parts are probably not true. Poor old Teddy Two probably didn't get the red-hot poker up his bum. Robert the Bruce probably didn't interact with the famous spider in the cave. The lights of Cairo probably did not go out the night Lord Caernarvon died. It's a shame, but there you are.

And I can definitely say, without any hesitation whatsoever – King Alfred did not burn the cakes. Because, for a start, I think it was bread – not cakes. But whatever it was – and I might as well carry on saying cakes – he didn't burn them. We did. We burned the cakes. Well, actually, I did.

Yeah. Sorry about that.

I don't know if he ever gets tired of being right. Probably not. But Peterson was right. They didn't love us, but they didn't kill us either, which is usually the best we can hope for. We walked slowly down the causeway and into the clearing. Peterson went first, with his bundle of firewood. Maxwell followed on behind, staggering slightly under her load because, of course, she'd picked up far more than she could comfortably carry and wouldn't admit it. And, finally, came me, the slave, clutching my twig.

A goodwife scattering something to a herd of marauding chickens was the first to catch sight of us, calling something over her shoulder, clattering her wooden bucket against a stone to attract attention, and then standing straight and still outside her hut.

Around the village, heads lifted. The women melted away and men came forward. None of them carried a sword, but one or two conveniently held axes and one, a monster man with muscles to match, carried a hammer. A visiting smith, maybe. They weren't threatening – they were just there, directly in our path, and it was very obvious we weren't going any further.

I stood quietly at the back, making an excellent job of portraying the hapless slave who really didn't want to be here. Why on earth we couldn't have watched Alfred's culinary catastrophe from up beyond the treeline was a bit of a mystery to me, but who was I to argue?

Peterson said something, bowed slightly and gestured to his load of wood and then to Maxwell. He was probably introducing them in order of social importance. Wood first, then wife. He didn't bother with me at all. One day, I really am going to have to have a word with them about this.

They could see we weren't armed and they didn't seem particularly bothered by my twig. After a bit of muttering, they stepped aside and indicated the fire. So we'd obviously done the right

thing with the firewood. And we couldn't just dump our offerings on the pile, either. There were three distinct components, light brushwood, probably used for lighting this and other fires, medium-sized logs in the middle, and really big logs up near the fire. One of those would probably last a whole night. We laid our offerings appropriately and stepped back.

I think the plan was just to sit quietly by the fire as if we were resting travellers, observe what was going on, watch for Alfred igniting the baked goods, and then make ourselves scarce. Of course, quietly never happens. As Max once explained to me, the mere fact of us being there tends to upset the balance of things. History is trying to get rid of us – like an irritating piece of grit in your eye, she said, looking straight at me for some reason – hence hardly anything goes according to plan. I'm pretty sure this is historian speak for it's all gone tits-up again and it's probably our fault, but don't tell Dr Bairstow.

Anyway, we settled ourselves by the fire. Maxwell spread her wet skirts to dry and they brought us beer. Nice hospitable folk.

We sat and sipped. Well, Peterson and I did. Max held her beaker as if it would twist in her hand and bite her at any moment, so I finished mine and started on hers as well. It wasn't bad.

I know I'm always banging on about them but – when they put their minds to it – our historians are bloody good. They sat quietly by the fire, ostensibly resting from their travels and drying out, but I knew neither of them would have taken their eyes off Alfred, and that at least one of them would be discreetly recording the village and its inhabitants at the same time. The villagers carried on with their working day. Everything was fine.

Alfred stood up again and, using a cloth, began to select hot stones from around the hearth, dropping one into each cauldron of water. To help them boil more quickly, I assumed. While he was on his feet, he checked the little balls of dough, still proving around the fire, turning one or two to better positions. When he'd finished that, he fed the fire again. He was careful and conscientious, obviously taking his responsibilities very seriously, and only when he was satisfied everything was in order did he come to sit alongside us. I could feel Maxwell quivering with excitement and she was a good three feet away.

He greeted us courteously enough. I could see Max and Peterson were having difficulty understanding him, though, and Peterson responded in Latin. That was enough for Alfred and a moment later, they were well away. I've picked up a bit of Latin over the years and could mostly follow what was being said. He was asking for news.

Peterson responded gravely, saying as little as possible and none

of it good. I could see Alfred's face cloud with disappointment. His shoulders slumped and he sighed and looked away. He looked so dejected and lonely, and I only meant it as a kindness, but I offered him my beaker of beer. He looked at it for a while and then at me. Properly. Seeing the man and not the servant. He inclined his head and thanked me politely. Suddenly, I could see why, physically frail though he was, men followed him.

Peterson had wandered off to commune with the midden, so I turned to Maxwell and said, 'Can you translate for me?'

She nodded.

If Alfred was surprised to be addressed by a servant and a woman, he had the manners not to show it.

I said, 'You shouldn't give up. You should never give up. There's a saying: This too will pass. And it will. Everything gets better. Because nothing stays the same. Bad becomes good. Good becomes bad as well – you can't stop that – but you can be ready for it and deal with it when it happens. But this ...' I gestured around us, 'all this – will pass. You should remember that. That's what I did when I was a kid and some things were too bad to think about. I used to tell myself – this will pass. And it always does.'

OK. Surprised myself a bit there. I've never actually mentioned my private life to anyone except Hunter, and then only briefly, and no one was more surprised than me when she put her arms around me and cried a little, which nearly set me off as well.

I waited for Maxwell to catch up and then ploughed on.

'When I was a kid, there were bad times, when nothing went right, and I had to do some things I didn't want to. Like you do when you buy off the Danes. Anyway, I got caught. Several times, actually.'

I paused again, remembering. The magistrate had been quite a decent old stick. We got to know each other quite well. He always said how grieved he was to see me standing in front of him yet again, and I would point out, quite reasonably, I think, that if the police stopped arresting me then he wouldn't have to, would he?

Anyway, I was caught once too often and they gave me a choice. Detention or the army. I chose the army and things got better. Because all things pass.

I shifted on my uncomfortable log. 'What I'm trying to say is that everything passes and you should never give up because bad times always get better. One day, all this will be in your past. There's a story about a bloke hiding in a cave somewhere, watching a spider struggling to spin a web. It keeps trying. It never gives up. And eventually it succeeds. The man learns from the spider. He doesn't give up and neither should you.'

I sat back and watched his face while Maxwell repeated all that in

Latin.

When she'd finished, there was a bit of a silence and then, without looking at me, she scooted up and she put her hand on mine. Just for a very quick moment. I patted it carefully because she can be a bit unpredictable sometimes and it made me nervous to have her that close.

Anyway, Alfred seemed impressed – although whether by my tale-telling abilities or my prowess with short redheads was hard to say. We sat quietly together watching the flames, and then all hell broke loose and, just for once, none of it was our fault.

A little girl ran past us. She was wearing what I suspected was her mother's dress, cut down to fit, but still much too big. Her face was alight with excitement.

She ran to a hut, fiddled with the latch, and dragged the door open. Her mother – I assumed – busy tipping slop to the pigs, shouted a warning, but too late.

A dog flew out of the door. Not one of the short-legged, curly-tailed mongrels we'd seen sniffing around the place, but a long-legged, silky-haired aristocrat. Obviously someone's pride and joy. Probably the best hunting dog in the village and, just at this moment, in what you might call a very ... receptive state.

She raced past the little girl, knocking her over into the mud. The little girl began to wail. Her mother dropped the bucket and ran towards her. The pigs were vocal in their disapproval of this action.

For some reason, I tensed. This had all the makings of one of those sort of situations.

The dog ran past us, eyes bright, tongue lolling, and obviously feeling extremely friendly towards other dogs.

The first to notice her was some disreputable rat-thing curled up as close to the fire as he dared to get. Unable to believe his luck, he raced towards her as fast as his stumpy little legs would carry him. He was half her size and I couldn't help wondering what he thought he was going to do when he got there, but I needn't have worried. He took a flying leap and hung on for grim death.

Sadly for him, he didn't enjoy himself for long. I suspected that, rather like me, he was quite some way down in the pecking order, and by this time, others had realised what was happening.

More dogs piled on and it got nasty. Fights broke out. One minute we had a lovely, peaceful rural scene and the next minute we were all embroiled in some sort of massive dog punch-up.

A huge, solid mass of yelping, yapping, baying, growling, snapping, snarling dogs was cartwheeling around the place. Things were knocked over. The pig troughs went flying, distributing their contents in a kind of graceful arc. The pig protests increased in

volume. Other things toppled. Shrieking chickens fluttered about, tripping people up in their efforts to fly to safer areas. Women picked up screaming kids. Other dogs raced to join in. Cats yowled and fled for the rooftops. Red-faced men shouted and wildly laid about them with sticks.

Somehow, in all the confusion, we got separated. Peterson was over at the midden anyway, Alfred ended up on the other side of the fire and Maxwell was swept away in the confusion. I don't think she was in any great danger, but I couldn't afford to let anything happen to her. Chief Farrell would stare at me reproachfully. Then Dr Bairstow would give it a go, and then Major Guthrie would do a bloody sight more than stare. I had to act with decision and competence.

I stood up and fell over a small child.

You would think, wouldn't you, that parents would be more careful with their offspring and not just leave them lying around all over the place.

A woman, backed up against the same fence as Maxwell, swung her bucket at the seething mass of dogs, missed and fetched Maxwell a great buffet across the chest. She fell backwards over the fence, showing vast amounts of long crimson and gold rugby socks which were, in the absence of the Sky Sports Channel, probably the most exciting thing they'd seen around here for years.

They would almost certainly have caused a stir if everyone's attention hadn't been on the fact that every dog for miles around was desperate to join the fun, convinced he finally had a chance with the snooty bitch who was never allowed out to play.

Maxwell, meanwhile, was on her back in the pig-pen – a phrase I really feel isn't used anything like often enough. Remembering I'm supposed to prevent this sort of thing, I went to help her up out of the mud, but as I moved to assist, Peterson caught my arm and held me back, saying softly, 'Why not just give it a moment, eh?'

So we stood and watched and it was bloody funny because every time she managed to pull herself up, an excited dog or two would race past and down she would go again. Only when the language became particularly ripe was I permitted to intervene.

We went to pick her up and strangely, she wasn't in the happiest mood.

'Where were you?'

'I was here,' I said, injured. Where did she think I would be?

'And you didn't intervene because ...?'

'Well, they might have turned on me. Did you see the teeth on that mastiff?'

'Yes, actually, I did, thanks to you. Did you at any point

remember your primary function here?’

‘Of course,’ I said, drawing myself up proudly. ‘Not to interfere. Not to do anything to change the course of history. Not to ...’ I paused.

‘Not to allow historians to be damaged.’

‘Yeah. I always forget that one.’

She opened her mouth but, thankfully, before she could utter, the noise of dogs rose to a crescendo. The excited barking and yapping had turned to yelping. Dogs were scattering in all directions, tails between their legs, crying in pain. We turned to see what had happened.

They’d been scalded. Not badly – but, with a sense of self-preservation historians would do well to emulate – they were disappearing as fast as their stumpy little legs could carry them. Two seconds later, apart from the grinning hussy who had caused all the trouble – and no, this time I don’t mean Maxwell – the village was completely dog free.

Nobody was paying them the slightest attention. There had been a disaster.

The area around the fire was swimming in water. Empty cauldrons and pots lay on their side. Whether someone had deliberately thrown the water over the dogs to separate them, or whether the dogs had knocked them over in the mêlée, was not clear. One thing, however, was very clear.

The fire was out.

Everything had stopped dead, the place a shambles. Some of the fences had been knocked down and the pigs were out. The chickens were on the roof. The carefully stacked woodpile was overturned. Washing lay in the mud. Buckets and barrels had been overturned and their contents trampled into the mud.

So this was how the cakes were burned, and we’d missed it.

Maxwell was wiping her face and Peterson was being menaced by a very agitated pack of ... geese, I think. Big, nasty-looking birds anyway. But not swans, I was happy to note. Otherwise I’d be up a tree by now. Not that that would help. St Mary’s swans can climb trees as well. Why they would want to, I don’t know, but they can.

Oh no. As you were. This was not the day the cakes were burned. Unbelievably, about the only things not damaged in the entire riot were the lumps of dough still sitting serenely at the edge of the ex-fire. I stared at them in disbelief – you’d have thought they would have been the first casualties, but no, there they were. Intact and unburned. Incredible.

All around us, people were distraught. They were running around like ants, and as if that wasn’t enough, it had started to rain again.

Not hugely, just a gentle drizzle that soaked everything without you actually noticing.

We did what we could to help, setting things upright again, picking the washing out of the mud, and draping it over fences, but they couldn't get the fire going again. Don't get me wrong – they weren't unskilful. Half a dozen men were working away with fire steels and pieces of flint, but it just wasn't working. Anglo-Saxon curses filled the air. People were getting wet. The wood was wet. The fire was out. There would be no warmth tonight. No light. No hot meal. No bread.

Men were restacking the all-important log pile. And still no fire. There were plenty of flames being generated, but nothing would catch. Some people were rubbing two sticks between their hands as well, blowing gently on to a handful of dried grass or what looked like sheep's wool. There was plenty of smoke, but no flames. Somewhere, a child began to cry.

I know we're not supposed to interfere. God knows, we've had that drummed into us often enough. And most of us learned our lesson at Troy. You don't interfere. There are consequences.

I stood and watched their increasingly desperate efforts to get the fire going again. I don't know why all the other people didn't try to get under some sort of cover, but they didn't. Those who weren't desperately trying to get a flame stood in tight groups. Watching. Their fire more than just a tool. It was a symbol of something important to them. And it should never be allowed to go out.

I stepped back and stared at the ground.

We're only supposed to record and document. To stand back and watch people living their lives. To watch events unfold and record them. And we do. I've lost count of the coronations, or assassinations, or battles I've witnessed and I don't know why this was any different. This wasn't some major historical event. This was a few people whose lives weren't that great anyway, facing what was, in their world, a disaster. It's hard to believe, I know. Lighting a fire seems such a small thing. But it was everything to these people. Their only source of light, heat, food and all the rest of it. Their source of life.

The rain began to speed up, coming down faster.

Maxwell and Peterson reappeared, surveying the shambles.

'Did we do this?' I said to Maxwell.

She shook her head. 'Not directly, although I might be responsible for the pigs getting out.'

'And,' said Peterson, thoughtfully, 'Alfred hasn't burned the cakes.'

We surveyed the lumps of dough sitting innocently amongst the

carnage.

‘We don’t know that,’ said Maxwell. ‘We only know he hasn’t burned the cakes today.’

‘Suppose they never get burned. Suppose it should have happened today and now it never will.’

We looked at each other and then at Alfred silently helping to re-stack the woodpile, his face tired and sad. And without hope.

I sighed. It was going to have to be me, wasn’t it?

‘I’ll be back,’ I said, hoping they’d mistake me for Arnie, but I think it went straight over their heads. Not difficult, I suppose. Typical bloody historians – they think they’re so smart and yet they never get the cultural references. They certainly didn’t get this one.

‘OK,’ said Peterson, vaguely, all his attention on the villagers’ attempts to restart the fire. I don’t think Maxwell even noticed I was gone.

It only took me about half an hour to get to the pod and back. You can certainly cover the ground a lot more quickly when there aren’t any historians to slow you down, and I hardly fell into any bogs at all. I knew what I wanted. I banged in the combination, opened the locker door and grabbed what I needed, shoved it all in an old bag, and trotted back again, splashing through watery mud and muddy water, eventually arriving back at the village hot, breathless, and very wet. Well, I’d been wet when I set out. I was soaked to the bloody skin now.

This was going to be difficult. I couldn’t just march into the village and let rip. I circled around, eventually finding a little spot that would do nicely, pulled out a fizzer and shouted, ‘Fire from the sky. Fire from the sky.’

At the same time, I ripped the tab off the fizzer. You’re supposed to fire them into the air, but I shot this one into a damp pine tree where it caught on a branch clearly visible to anyone looking, and legged it out of there.

Away through the trees, Maxwell and Peterson, who aren’t anywhere near as stupid as they’d like us to believe, were shouting, ‘Fyra fram heofon! Fyra fram heofon!’ Fire from the sky. Fire from the sky. At least, I assume that’s what it was. Whatever they were yelling, the cry was taken up and I could hear people crashing through the trees.

It was time to go, so I went.

I circled back around the village. Most of the men had seized some kind of weapon and were charging towards the strange red glow they could see. Well, everyone could see it, actually. It was a distress flare and they’re designed to be seen from a great distance

and in all sorts of weather conditions.

I hid behind a lean-to, making sure I had a clear line of sight to the fire. Intentionally or otherwise, Max and Peterson were clearing the area around the fire, pointing at the strange red glow away in the trees.

I switched the blaster to full power and waited for it to stop whining. I had to be quick. They'd all be back in a minute. The second the charged light came on, I brought the gun up and fired. A good long, straight blast of white hot flame, directly at the fire. About seven seconds would probably have done it, but I would only get this one chance and I had to make sure, so I gave it fifteen, which, as I did admit to Dr Bairstow afterwards, might have been a bit of overkill.

All right, so they hadn't been able to get a flame, but that massive ash bed had been there for weeks. Months, maybe and although the top layers might have been a bit soggy, there must have been a good heat still, right at the very bottom.

For a second, nothing happened and then wood and ash exploded in all directions. Everyone ducked and the whole thing went up like a pillar of flame. As Max said afterwards, it was quite biblical. You looked for a fiery chariot. Well, apparently she did, she said. Pieces of burning wood were scattered all over the village. Several pieces landed on thatched roofs where, given the general soggianness of everything in the area, they spluttered and went out.

The point was, however, that the fire was lit. Well, more than lit, actually. We had a bit of a raging inferno on our hands. Livestock bolted. Women screamed. Peterson later admitted he might have screamed himself.

I stowed the blaster up in the lower branches of an old tree, scraped off some moss to leave a fresh scar on the trunk so that I could find it later, and strolled casually into the village with my patented 'nothing to do with me' expression.

Men came racing back and there was confusion and consternation and a lot of shouting, but the whole point – as I kept having to say – was that the bloody fire was going again. Everyone would have a hot meal tonight.

Alfred – King Alfred, I suppose I should call him – was one of the few who had failed to run into the woods to check out the big red spitting thing in the tree. He turned and watched me walk towards him, stared at me for a few seconds and then turned back to the fire again. He was quite bright, was Alfred. I gave him the guileless smile. The one that never works on Hunter. Or Dr Bairstow. Or anyone, now I come to think of it. It didn't work on him, either. He stared thoughtfully at me and opened his mouth to say something.

I could only think, bugger – busted.

I was marshalling explanations when someone behind me screamed with rage and I was shoved suddenly sideways. I staggered and nearly fell into the bloody fire. Peterson grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

Now what?

Whatever Alfred might or might not have been about to say to me will forever remain unknown. He was under attack. Some ancient, crooked goodwife with a face like leather and no teeth was shrieking curses at him. He was backing off, hands held palms outwards in a placatory manner. He might as well not have bothered. She was incandescent with fury. If the fire hadn't already been lit, then they could certainly have used her as a firefighter. He was trying to say something, but I could have told him he was wasting his breath. The best thing you can do with women is to let them get it off their chests – whatever it is – and then deal with the aftermath, when they eventually wind down.

This one showed no signs of winding down. She looked about a hundred and eight, which meant she was probably around forty and she was as skinny as the broom handle she was waving around in front of him. In front of Alfred, her king. I wondered if I should do something.

To shouts of laughter and encouragement from the villagers, she fetched him an almighty great buffet around the ear that nearly knocked both of them into the middle of next week. I had no idea what she was carrying on about, actually, I was just glad it wasn't me.

'Well, I'll be buggered,' said Peterson from behind me. 'Will you look at that?'

'What?'

'That.'

We all looked at that.

In all the legends of Alfred and the cakes, you get the impression they were just a bit singed. Alfred burnt the cakes it says. The unspoken implication being you could just scrape off the black bits – much as Max does when she makes toast – and carry on as before. Not this time.

These cakes weren't just burned. They were completely incinerated. Pure carbon. A couple of dozen little black nuggets smoked gently on the scorched hearthstones, and she really wasn't happy about it. Not happy at all. Alfred was giving ground, trying to defend himself from the blows raining down upon him. Everyone seemed to think it was extremely funny. Except the goodwife, of course. Alfred dodged around the other side of the fire. Still shrieking,

she pursued him.

At this point, even I wouldn't have blamed Alfred if he'd turned and pointed at me. You know – blame the slave. In this case, of course, quite justifiably. But he didn't. He covered his head as best he could and tried to dodge the blows. People were still laughing and shouting advice.

And he'd burned the cakes. The legend was true after all. Well, I'd burned the cakes and he'd got the blame – which makes a change. In my case, it's usually the other way around. Dr Bairstow often makes quite spirited attempts to blame me for things that happened even before I was born. Or even before they've happened. Like the reindeer thing ...

Speaking of which ...

I plucked at Maxwell's sleeve. She nodded. 'Yes, we should go. While we still can.'

We discreetly gathered up our stuff. No one was paying any attention to us in any way and we quietly left the village. I glanced back. The flames had settled down a little. Pans and cauldrons were being righted and filled with water again. Normal life was resuming.

Alfred, now minus the goodwife, resumed his position, elbows on his knees, watching the fire. Just as I was about to turn away, he looked up at me. For a moment, we looked at each other. He raised a hand – whether in farewell or thanks, I'd never know. I waved back and then turned to follow Max and Peterson, who could be heard falling off the path some way ahead.

I nipped off to retrieve the blaster. The fizzer had fizzed itself to a standstill without igniting the tree in which it was lodged.

We hurried on towards the pod. It would be dark in an hour. Time to go. Job done. Alfred had fulfilled his part of the legend. And I like to think the whole afternoon had cheered him a little. Given him some hope, perhaps.

In seven weeks, around Whitsuntide, he would ride to Ecgbrihtesstan – Egbert's Stone – to rally the men from Somerset and Wiltshire and Hampshire to his banner. They would go on to beat the Danes, Alfred would be king again and Guthrum would accept defeat and baptism. England is saved. For the time being.

It was darker in amongst the trees, and, to tell the truth, just a little bit spooky. Mists curled up through them and now, far from echoing with birdsong and sounds of small creatures in the undergrowth, everywhere was completely silent. Something white – an owl, I hoped – drifted soundlessly past at head height.

I stopped and looked back. Apart from a faint glow visible through the trees, there was no sign anyone lived nearby. I could see why Alfred had chosen to hide out here.

We hurried on, splashing our way back to the pod. Which, contrary to historians' dire predictions, had not collided with an iceberg and sunk. A small amount of smelly water washed in with us as we opened the door, but as Peterson said, the smell of old cabbage was so bad that no one would notice anyway.

St Mary's, in contrast to the dark, damp woods of the 9th century, was lit up like a Christmas tree – appropriately enough. We decontaminated, tidied ourselves up, and made our way to Sick Bay where Hunter, disappointingly no longer dressed as Tinkerbell and now clutching a scratchpad, didn't hang about.

'Right – which of you is most injured?'

'None of us,' said Maxwell. 'Can we get a move on?'

'What have you eaten or drunk?'

'Nothing. I'm starving and desperate for a pee. Can we hurry things along, please?'

Hunter thrust a small container. 'Fill that.'

Max regarded it in silence. 'You'd better let me have a couple of those. Or possibly a small bucket.'

'Do you have one in blue?' said Peterson, not helping.

I smiled winningly and waited for her to wilt beneath the Markham charm.

Fat chance. She rounded on me. 'What are you doing? Stop that. You'll frighten the children.'

'They're here already?' I said, panicking a little because you can't just scramble into a reindeer costume. There are antlers and flashing noses and poo distribution systems to set up. To say nothing of keeping my face out of Evans's backside. I needed to get a move on.

'I'll go first,' I said, taking the container. 'I can't let anything get between me and the back end of a reindeer,' and as the words left my mouth I realised they could be open to misinterpretation, but only by people with nasty minds. Which is all of St Mary's and especially those standing in front of me.

'I'm not going in the scanner after him,' said Peterson in pretended horror, stepping back. 'He's a pervert. God knows what he'd leave lying around in there.'

'Agreed,' said Maxwell and the two of them pulled rank and I had to wait. I made myself a cup of tea, because I don't live in a world where nurses make it for me, and called up Evans.

The History Department disappeared eventually, bickering away, and then it was my turn.

Usually, when it's just Hunter and me, these things can take ages because she says she has to be thorough and, believe me, she is. There have been times when I can barely ... yes, well, never mind

about that now. Sometimes, and for God's sake don't tell anyone this, because I don't think anyone's noticed, but sometimes, after everyone's been scanned, Hunter and I – well, you know. Which is why I always made a point of wearing my best CKs, because even though she worships the ground I walk on – or will one day, I'm sure – there are occasions when the old tightie-whities just won't cut it.

This was not going to be one of those occasions, however, because I knew Evans was waiting in the lift with the reindeer outfit, so I patted her on the shoulder, told her I'd see her later, and pushed off. I'd pay for that later, of course, but I was betting she'd be so thrilled by the reindeer routine that she'd just melt into my arms.

We changed in the lift – and that's not as easy as it sounds. We did Evans first, carefully tying on his antlers and manoeuvring his nose into position. Then me, with the poo pouch dangling between my back legs. I think I can confidently say that's the first time that phrase has ever been used in English Literature.

We had a quick practice – Evans flashed his nose a couple of times. It was dazzlingly bright. We might have over-egged the pudding a little. He was quite blind afterwards. I popped a couple of olives in the poo pouch and wiggled my hips. Distribution successful.

'I can't see a bloody thing,' muttered Evans, bouncing off a wall.

'They say that flashing makes you blind,' I said, to cheer him up, which didn't work at all, and he told me he'd had egg sandwiches for lunch, and I said he'd better not have and what had I said about that, and he said, sorry, he forgot, but it would probably be OK, and there was rather a tense silence between us, broken only by the sound of someone summoning the lift back up to Sick Bay.

'Quick,' I said, and we exited in a hurry. The doors closed and we waited.

'Five, four, three, two, one,' said Evans.

'WHO THE BLOODY HELL HAS CRAPPED IN THIS LIFT?'

The words reverberated around the building.

Oh, swiving hell. Swive is a word I'd learned in the 17th century and which has been standing me in good stead ever since. I'd thought it would be Hunter in the lift and we'd have a bit of a giggle, only we'd got Dr Foster instead and believe me, she doesn't giggle. We could hear her stamping down the stairs. The Footsteps of Fear on the Staircase of Misery.

'Run,' said Evans, and we did.

It's not a job for the faint-hearted, being the back end of a pantomime reindeer. After only a few minutes, I had neck ache, back ache, and knee ache. It was bloody dark in there and I couldn't see a thing. Not

that I could have seen much anyway. Evans has a backside the size of a small pony.

We trotted down the long corridor towards the Great Hall where the festivities were scheduled to take place. The plan was that someone would put their hand to their ear and say, 'Oh. I think I can hear someone coming. I wonder who that could be?' and Father Christmas would appear.

I mean – seriously? It's hardly Shakespeare, is it? And trust me, I've met him.

And then Dieter – sorry, Father Christmas – would make a spectacular entrance, pulling up in his sleigh. He would ho ho ho his way through the front doors, followed by his entourage of Ice Queens, Fairies, Elves, Santa's Little Helpers and all the rest of them, into which we would, with skill and cunning, insert ourselves. Small gifts would be distributed and then, in the lull between that and everyone sitting down and gorging themselves on Mrs Mack's festive offerings, we planned to do our little show.

Naturally, we needed an accomplice to work the music, and after careful consideration as to levels of technical skill – which ruled out the entire History Department – and sense of humour – ditto the Technical Section – we'd selected Miss Lingoss for the honour, on the grounds that anyone with fairy lights in her hair couldn't be all bad, and she'd agreed. To do it I mean.

The initial comments were not encouraging.

'Oh, look – are Mary and Joseph here? Have they brought their ass?'

There followed a lot of rude banter which, given the festive season and the age of our waiting audience was not, I felt, appropriate.

Evans tried propitiating people with his nose and that didn't work at all.

'You. Reindeer,' said Santa, sternly. 'Up front – with me.'

We sidled delicately into place and prepared to dazzle the room.

'OK, people,' said Santa. 'This is it.'

The doors were flung open and we were on.

It all went horribly wrong. We hadn't practised climbing steps. I couldn't see where I was going. Evans tripped. Then I tripped. We lurched into Santa who staggered into the Great Hall, belatedly trying to retrieve the situation by bellowing, 'Ho ho ho. Merry Christmas everyone,' at the top of his voice.

Three kids burst into tears there and then, and there were only twelve of them anyway, so that was twenty-five percent of them crying their eyes out. Isn't it? Yes, one quarter. Twenty-five percent.

And we were only thirty seconds in.

The parents, unsure of what to expect from the nutters at St Mary's, who had therefore insisted on accompanying their children, bristled and began to gather offspring to their bosoms, prior to a hasty departure.

I'd banged my nose on Evans's bottom (again, not a phrase often used by Jane Austen) and was beginning to have second thoughts about the whole thing – traumatising kids at Christmas just doesn't feel right somehow – when I heard our music. We later discovered that Lingoss – a bright girl, and I'm not just saying that because her head was glowing – in an attempt to stem the stampede, had started our music. Suddenly, we were on.

We opened with me cocking my leg against the Christmas tree – you know, just to give them a flavour of the sophisticated entertainment in store for them.

'Daddy, he's doing a wee on the Christmas tree.'

'Hush, dear. Look at the pretty lights.'

'Ready?' muttered Evans. 'On three ...'

I know the can-can isn't a particularly festive piece of music, but it is jolly jolly. Someone somewhere started to clap in time to the music and two seconds later everyone had joined in. Except for Dr Foster – still miffed about the poo in the Sick Bay lift, I suspect – and Dr Bairstow, who just doesn't do that sort of thing. He's not so much laid back as bolt upright. In fact, he's slightly more vertical than a plumb line.

It was quite an easy routine. One two three kick. Left right left kick. Wiggle the bum. Flash the nose. Trot in a circle and do it again. We thought we'd incorporate a bit of 'business'. That's a show-biz term by the way. I'm an actor, you know. I've appeared in Hamlet. So we sidled up to Bashford, and Evans pretended to sneeze and squirted him with green goo at the same time. The kids loved it.

'Daddy, why is that man all covered in snot?'

'Hush, dear. Look at the pretty lights.'

Bashford took it quite well in that he didn't thump either of us. Not there and then, anyway.

And then we sidled back the other way and I sat on Chief Farrell's lap. I was aiming for Psycho Psykes, because she's always up for a laugh, but not being able to see, I missed. Everyone thought it was hilarious. I could hear Max and Kalinda Black shrieking like washerwomen.

Something told me it wouldn't be a good idea to linger long on that lap, so we got up. We did a lot of creeping up behind Peterson, who was amazing. The kids would shout, 'Look out – he's behind you,' and he would whirl around at just the right moment to miss us.

Pure gold, as we in the acting profession say.

Evans flashed his nose like something out of the Blackpool Illuminations and – the big moment – I activated the poo pouch. A hundred olives delivered with pin-point precision.

‘Daddy, he’s done a giant poo. Look.’

‘Hush dear. Look at the pretty lights again.’

I don’t want to boast, but our big finish was a huge success. Everyone clapped and cheered.

I poked Evans. ‘Let’s get out of here.’ Because you should always leave them wanting more.

We’d planned a cracking exit – because appearing as a pantomime reindeer is a bit like robbing a bank – you should always have your exit planned. We moonwalked backwards out of the Hall into the Library. Evan’s nose went into overdrive and there were olives skidding everywhere. The kids were cheering, trauma forgotten. We were the heroes of the afternoon.

Lingoss closed the door behind us and everything suddenly went quiet. Evans pulled off his head and gasped for breath, and I straightened my creaking back, breathing in the welcome smell of dust, damp and books.

Evans stiffened. ‘Look out. He’s behind you.’

I closed my eyes.

‘Good afternoon,’ said Dr Bairstow.

Oh yes he was.

We pulled ourselves together – a phrase which, when you’re the two halves of a reindeer, has a whole new meaning.

‘Good afternoon, sir.’

I did feel we were on firmish ground here, because he hadn’t actually forbidden us to do the reindeer thing. And we had just saved the afternoon. If it wasn’t for us, every social worker in Rushfordshire would be converging on St Mary’s at this very moment, accusing us of God knows what. As it was, the guests had had a bit of a giggle, pressies were being distributed, and soon they’d all sit down and stuff themselves stupid. Where was the problem?

It turned out I might have misread the situation slightly. It wasn’t Rudolph he wanted to discuss.

‘It would appear,’ he said, ‘that the legend of Alfred burning the cakes is not completely accurate, after all.’

I suddenly remembered. The cakes. I’d completely forgotten about Alfred and the cakes. Had Peterson and Maxwell grassed me up? That’s historians for you.

I remained calm, in the best traditions of St Mary’s. ‘Not quite sir, no. It was bread – not cakes. As I shall say in my report. Which I shall

go and write now.’ I made for the door.

I swear he never moved, but somehow my feet lost momentum and I trailed to a halt. On the other side of the door, everyone was having a lovely time, singing Christmas carols and distributing the presents, while in here, King Herod was gearing up for the Slaughter of the Innocents.

He waited.

I felt compelled to fill the silence. ‘Not really my fault, sir. And the people were pretty desperate. It was getting dark, and everything was so wet, and they just couldn’t get the fire re-lit, and even though it wasn’t my fault the fire went out, I did feel we should do something. Obviously, I was very discreet about the whole thing.’

‘Discretion is not a word I normally associate with your *modus operandi*, Mr Markham.’

‘Well, no sir, I take your point, but it was only the one fizzer as a distraction, and then a quick blast while everyone was looking the other way. Job done, sir.’

He said nothing.

I sighed. ‘I’m sorry about the cakes, sir. I only had a few seconds to get the thing re-lit and I’m afraid the cakes were a victim of friendly fire.’ I beamed at him because that was rather clever. ‘Get it, sir?’

Apparently he didn’t, staring bleakly at me from across the Library. Evans was demonstrating true Security Section loyalty and melting back into the woodwork.

‘Not so fast, Mr Evans,’ Dr Bairstow said, without turning his head, and Evans melted back again.

‘Was it Maxwell who told you about the cakes, sir?’

‘Why no, Mr Markham. You did. Just now.’

Dammit. I’d just fallen for the oldest trick in the book. This is what happens when you spend the afternoon with your head up Evans’s bum. Brain-cell failure on a massive scale.

‘Well, never mind, sir. Thanks to me, the world has a legend that is both colourful and heart-warming. A story of courage, modesty and tenacity. Rather like me when you think about it.’

He said nothing.

I thought it would be a good idea to change the subject. Move the conversation on a bit.

‘Did you enjoy the show, sir?’

‘I did indeed Mr Markham. Most enjoyable.’

I breathed a quick sigh of relief. Whenever I find myself on the wrong end of one of his beaky stares, I always find its best to accentuate the positive and here he was, accentuating away all by himself and without any help from me. Crisis averted.

Oh no it wasn't.

'I do believe the little kiddies are clamouring for Rudolph's return and I know, given your close links with the acting profession, you will not wish to disappoint your audience.' He paused. 'Or me, of course. I must, therefore, beg you to remain in costume for, let us say the remainder of the day, bringing festive cheer and jollification to us all.'

Bloody hell. He couldn't do that. There's a whole section of the Geneva Convention dedicated to preventing this sort of cruel and unusual punishment. To say nothing of Employment Law. Or even the Rights of Man.

They'd all be out there, eating and drinking, having a great time, and we'd be stuck here inside this foetid reindeer darkness, with nothing to eat, and worse, nothing to drink. I had a sudden vision of Hunter in her Tinkerbell costume, using her wand for the benefit of someone else ...

'But sir ...'

'The show, Mr Markham, must go on. And on. And on.'

And it did. We were in that bloody costume until midnight. Everyone else thought it was hilarious and I suppose it was – for them.

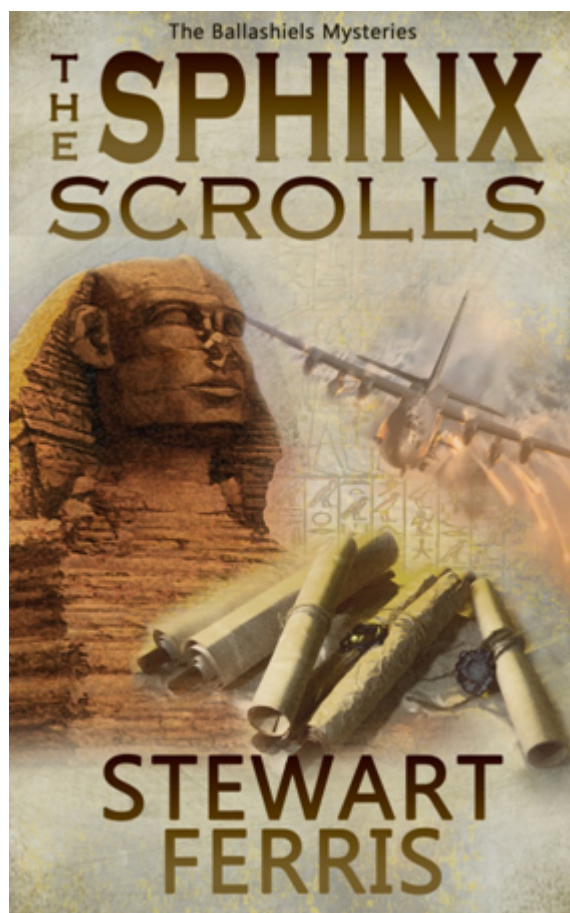
For us, it was a hot, sweaty, blanket-enclosed, alcohol-free, back-breaking hell. To say nothing of the perpetual presence of Evans's enormous backside, of which I'd already seen more than enough.

And, because I just know there's bound to be some sadistic soul out there who will want to know – no, he wasn't kidding about the egg sandwiches.

A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from everyone at St Mary's.

THE END

An excerpt from...



TUESDAY 4TH SEPTEMBER 2012

Abrasive dust filled the rough-hewn tunnel. Dr Ruby Towers called for a vacuum hose and held a protective mask to her mouth. Now she knew why her team members had complained so vehemently about cutting into limestone in that confined space. After each ten minute shift they would come out of the passage shaking and coughing. So she had taken her turn, enduring the same deafening roar, the same choking heat as the rest of them. And she had been the one to break through.

She dropped the drill and wiped the grit from her goggles. Her pulse raced. After months of planning and overcoming bureaucratic hurdles, after weeks of scanning, measuring and arguing, and after days of gruelling tunnelling, this was her moment.

She poked her scuffed aluminium Maglite into the opening. Her eyes struggled to focus beyond the whirling particles picked out by the torch. It was frustrating, but the mere presence of airborne dust thrilled her. It signified an end to the section of rock. She ripped off the mask and goggles and waited for the cloud to dissipate. Now she could see her prize.

A chamber.

The space was cramped, smaller in dimension than some of the individual blocks used on the nearby pyramids. Objects were stacked in the centre of this timeless cavity. She counted them. Ten. They were clay tubes, just a few inches in diameter and no more than two feet in length. All were greyed by immense antiquity.

Was this the fabled Hall of Records? Was this the repository of the knowledge of a lost civilisation? Would this discovery finally unravel the mystery of the age and purpose of the Great Sphinx of Giza?

‘Can we get the camera in here?’ she shouted over her shoulder.

The documentary cameraman and the presenter squeezed alongside her in the narrow shaft. The cameraman pointed the lens at the presenter, former soldier Matt Mountebank.

‘So tell us what you’ve found,’ he said, with calm authority in his Manhattan accent.

The camera swung round to Ruby’s face, almost pressing against her nose.

‘We’re directly beneath the flank of the Sphinx,’ she announced, her voice excited and high pitched. ‘This tunnel was begun a century ago by tomb robbers using explosives. Our scanners revealed a chamber just ahead, so we applied for permission to extend the

tunnel to join up with that chamber. That way there will be no external damage to the monument. And now –’

She paused. Matt was pulling faces at her from behind the camera. As usual. She kicked him in the leg with her heavy Altberg boot.

He stopped.

‘And now we’re through,’ she continued. ‘This peephole is enough to prove that the Sphinx houses an archaeological treasure. The clay tubes will almost certainly contain scrolls. If they are intact and readable, the ancient riddle of the Sphinx could be solved. We might be about to find out who built it, when they did so, and why.’

‘Turn off the camera. Everyone out.’

Ruby turned around. The Head of Antiquities was silhouetted in the tunnel entrance, flanked by two police officers. Dr Shepsit Ibrahim did not appear to share Ruby’s enthusiasm for the discovery.

‘Keep rolling,’ whispered Matt. ‘This could be good.’

‘Your licence has been revoked,’ shouted Dr Ibrahim. ‘This dig is finished.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding, Shepsit!’ protested Ruby. ‘We’ve been working towards this for months. I’ve found the chamber. I can see there are clay tubes in there. I can probably pull them out without even widening the hole. We can’t stop now!’

‘I’m sorry, Ruby,’ Ibrahim replied, her tone softening.

‘But you’re in charge, Shepsit. You can overrule this and get our licence back.’

‘I’m the one stopping it, Ruby. It’s over.’

Ruby felt as if she had been punched in the stomach.

‘What about Cambridge? All those nights we stayed up, solving the problems of the world, dreaming of making discoveries like this. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?’

Passionate tears began carving their way through the dust on Ruby’s cheeks. Ibrahim’s head bowed and she said nothing.

Ruby resisted the overpowering urge to slap her former college roommate as she stepped outside, police escort or not. In the unforgiving daylight, the two policemen seemed odd. Their uniforms didn’t fit, and neither did their features: more Central American than Middle Eastern. She grudgingly acknowledged them in her limited Arabic and received no response. They remained curiously clamped to Ibrahim’s side.

‘What’s got into you, Shepsit?’ Ruby pleaded. ‘And why are the police involved? This doesn’t make any sense.’

Dr Ibrahim rolled her eyes sideways, left and right. Ruby followed her gaze and looked at the police officers again. They seemed edgy. As they turned she noticed one of them was pressing something

firmly into Ibrahim's back beneath a small rag.

A pistol.

Ruby glanced at Matt, fearing that his special forces training might tempt him to play the hero. His Gulf War memoirs were legendary. He was not a man to mess with.

'Don't try anything stupid,' she grunted. 'I don't want Shepsit hurt.'

'Sure,' he replied, surprising her with his willingness to concede defeat. The ex-warrior began to walk away from the site with the rest of her despondent team.

'Is that it, Matt? You're not going to do anything?'

'You just told me not to.'

'I know, but you must have some trick you can use to overpower them?'

'Rubes, those guys have guns. I got a damn microphone.'

Ruby stomped after him. More blatantly fake policemen had gathered at the perimeter, ushering people from the scene and clearing the way for their forthcoming escape. She stopped and glanced back at the Sphinx. It had survived Napoleon's soldiers using it for target practice. It had foiled tomb robbers for millennia. Now, dwarfed by the grandeur of the Pyramid of Khafre behind it, the Sphinx stared forward with serene nobility while thieves dressed in police uniforms plundered priceless secrets from its heart.

Jodi Taylor

The Chronicles of St Mary's



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Published by Accent Press Ltd 2016

ISBN 9781682994740

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